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# Hume’s Internalist Epistemology in EHU 12[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Abstract**: Much has been written about Kemp Smith’s (1941) famous problem regarding the tension between Hume’s naturalism and his scepticism. However, most commentators have focused their attention on the *Treatise*; those who address the *Enquiry* often take it to express essentially the same message as the *Treatise*. When Hume’s scepticism in the *Enquiry* has been investigated in its own right, commentators have tended to focus on Hume’s inductive scepticism in Sections 4 and 5. All in all, it seems that Section 12 has been unduly neglected. This paper seeks to address Kemp Smith’s problem from the standpoint of Hume’s treatment of scepticism in EHU 12, and finds an interesting internalist account that makes sense both of Hume’s discussion in EHU 12, and his aims in the Enquiry as a whole, as well as one that is of substantive philosophical interest, having intriguing parallels to contemporary epistemological accounts.

## Hume’s Scepticism and Naturalism

The story is, by now, a familiar one. Originally raised by Kemp Smith (1941), the worry is that Hume’s extreme scepticism threatens to preclude his naturalistic ambitions of establishing a ‘science of man’ (THN Intro 7). How can Hume hope to establish such a science, which is ‘the only solid foundation for the other sciences’ (THN Intro 7), when his scepticism threatens to undermine any and every possible foundation? Is there a way of reading Hume that can do justice both to his naturalism and his scepticism, both of which seem so integral to his philosophy?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Much ink has been spilt about this problem, as is to be expected for an interpretive worry of this magnitude and importance. Why write another paper on this topic? I write this paper because I think there is a gap in the literature, insofar as EHU 12 has been relatively neglected in comparison with its more notorious counterpart, THN 1.4.7. In addressing this topic, the majority of commentators have tended to direct their focus on the *Treatise* rather than the *Enquiry*, as a quick examination of the literature will verify: for some examples, see Baier (1991), Garrett (1997), Owen (1999), Loeb (2002), Ridge (2003) Kail (2005), Russell (2008), Durland (2011), Qu (2014b), Schafer (2014), Schmitt (2014), and Ainslie (2015). Those who address the *Enquiry* often take it to express essentially the same message as the *Treatise*, for instance Popkin (1951, p. 406), Fogelin (1983, p. 399) Livingston (1998, p. 160), Stroud (1999, p. 230), and McCormick (1999, p. 446); Fogelin (1993) and Garrett (2015, Ch. 7) do not explicitly take a stand on the relation between the two, but seem to treat them as continuous.[[3]](#footnote-3) When Hume’s scepticism in the *Enquiry* has been investigated in its own right, commentators have tended to focus on Hume’s inductive scepticism in Sections 4 and 5, either exclusively (e.g. Millican 2002), or merely bringing in EHU 12 as a supplement (e.g. Winkler 1999, Qu 2014a). All in all, it seems that Section 12 has been unduly neglected. It is, I think, important to understand Section 12 on its own terms and do it justice as Hume’s considered take on scepticism,[[4]](#footnote-4) and this is the object of my paper.

In this paper, I will argue that Hume advances a novel and subtle internalist epistemology in EHU 12. This epistemology recommends a form of scepticism that is compatible and indeed continuous and consonant with his naturalistic science of man, and therefore there is no tension between the naturalistic and sceptical aspects of Hume’s philosophy. I will begin my argument with a brief exposition of the key moves and arguments of EHU 12 in Section 2. Section 3 moves on to an analysis of Hume’s treatments of various forms of scepticism: antecedent, Pyrrhonian, and mitigated. Section 4 briefly engages with the more standard sceptical reading of EHU 12. Section 5 concludes by pointing to parallels that Hume’s epistemology in EHU 12 holds with various contemporary internalist accounts.

## A Brief Exposition of EHU 12

Hume’s begins EHU 12 by posing the following questions: ‘What is meant by a sceptic? And how far it is possible to push these philosophical principles of doubt and uncertainty?’ (EHU 12.2). Hume begins by discussing and dismissing ‘antecedent scepticism’:

There is a species of scepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing: Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject. (EHU 12.3)[[5]](#footnote-5)

Hume then examines consequent scepticism, which is characterised as the methodology of doubting one’s faculties *consequent* to our enquiries finding them deceitful and fallacious:

There is another species of scepticism, *consequent* to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered, either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. (EHU 12.5)

Hume goes on to provide various sceptical arguments in the spirit of this consequent scepticism.

First, he examines scepticism with regard to the senses. The first sceptical argument Hume discusses is the ‘trite topics’ of ‘sceptics in all ages’ (EHU 12.6), which turns on such occurrences such as the pressing of our eyeballs, or the bent appearance of an oar in water. Hume quickly dismisses this line of argument: ‘These sceptical topics, indeed, are only sufficient to prove, that the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but that we must correct their evidence by reason’ (EHU 12.6). The second sceptical argument is that instinct along with our senses convinces us that our sensations themselves are external to and independent from us (EHU 12.7-8). Yet reason contradicts this pre-philosophical system, which is ‘destroyed by the slightest philosophy’, instead proposing indirect realism (EHU 12.9). However, reason cannot justify this system (EHU 12.10). The truth or falsity of the system is a matter of fact, but experience cannot say anything for or against it, since there is no observed constant conjunction between perceptions and objects (EHU 12.12).

The final sceptical argument against the senses that Hume examines is the familiar Berkeleian one that we cannot conceive of primary qualities without secondary qualities; if the latter are mental, then so are the former (EHU 12.15). Therefore, not only can reason say nothing for indirect realism, it in fact actively tells against it, at least insofar as reason accepts the modern system of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (EHU 12.16).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Hume’s second sceptical topic concerns abstract reasoning, his argument being the familiar one of infinite divisibility (EHU 12.18). Here Hume declines to spell out the solution he presents in the *Treatise*, but he cannot resist hinting at it (EHU 12.20n).

Hume’s third and final sceptical topic concerns moral or probable evidence. Hume gives two sceptical arguments, a popular and a philosophical one. The popular argument turns on

the natural weakness of human understanding; the contradictory opinions, which have been entertained in different ages and nations; the variations of our judgment in sickness and health, youth and old age, prosperity and adversity; the perpetual contradiction of each particular man’s opinions and sentiments; with many other topics of that kind. (EHU 12.21).

Hume dismisses this argument as ‘weak’ (*ibid*.); since we cannot but reason, this popular argument is insufficient to destroy moral evidence (EHU 12.21). Stronger is the philosophical argument, which points out that custom determines our probable judgments, and custom, ‘like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful’ (EHU 12.22). However, Hume also rejects this argument, at this point raising practical worries against Pyrrhonian scepticism as a whole, noting that Pyrrhonian scepticism is detrimental as well as psychologically untenable (EHU 12.23).

Hume proceeds to endorse his own ‘*mitigated* scepticism or *academical* philosophy’ (EHU 12.24), which takes two forms. First, it endorses epistemic diffidence:

In general, there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner. (EHU 12.24)

And secondly, it endorses the limitation of the scope of our enquiries:

Another species of *mitigated* scepticism, which may be of advantage to mankind, and which may be the natural result of the Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples, is the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding. (EHU 12.25)

Finally, Hume concludes EHU 12 with his infamous exhortation to ‘commit to the flames’ all enquiries that do not concern relations of ideas, nor can be empirically verified (EHU 12.34).

## Hume’s Epistemology in EHU 12

Hume’s aim in EHU 12 is quite straightforwardly to determine what form of scepticism we should embrace. There are three main forms of scepticism Hume addresses in EHU 12: he rejects antecedent scepticism and Pyrrhonian scepticism, before endorsing mitigated scepticism. This section analyses Hume’s objections to antecedent and Pyrrhonian scepticism in turn, before examining why mitigated scepticism is an answer to the methodological issues associated with these problematic forms of scepticism; it seems that there is a clear narrative running from Hume’s rejection of antecedent scepticism, to his rejection of Pyrrhonian scepticism, to his endorsement of mitigated scepticism.

## Antecedent Scepticism

Hume does not spend much time on antecedent scepticism, very briefly dismissing it. Antecedent scepticism is the methodology of, ‘*antecedent* to all study and philosophy’, adopting a ‘universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our faculties’ (EHU 12.3); that is to say, antecedent scepticism recommends dismissing our beliefs and faculties even prior to beginning our intellectual endeavours. Hume rightly points out that this would doom one’s intellectual projects from the start: we cannot find an ‘original principle’ that can guarantee the ‘veracity’ of our faculties, since such a principle does not exist; even if it did, ‘we could never advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident’ (EHU 12.3). In other words, Hume dismisses antecedent scepticism because he thinks the acquisition of knowledge impossible without employing our faculties; if we are to get anywhere in our intellectual endeavours, we have to at the very least begin our enquiries by trusting these faculties. As Garrett (2007, p. 6) argues, this indicates that Hume accords our faculties with default or *prima facie* authority.

Of course, default authority is not the complete story, for it comes too cheaply: by itself, it fails to explain how we can hold some operations of the faculties to be *unjustified*.To stop here would be to leave the door open to false metaphysics and superstition; rather, default authority is only a starting point for Hume in that it gives us some way to begin our epistemic projects. Armed with a way of conducting our enquiries, we now investigate the reliability of our faculties, turning our faculties reflexively upon themselves.[[7]](#footnote-7) Much will turn on this consequent investigation; default authority is not indefeasible, and can be undermined by consequent investigation that discovers our faculties to be unreliable. Our consequent investigation seeks to discern whether our faculties and operations are truth-conducive or not – that is, whether they have a tendency to produce true beliefs, as judged by our faculties themselves.[[8]](#footnote-8) Ultimately, those faculties or operations that are found to be truth-conducive will be consequently justified; those that are not will be judged to be unjustified, having their default authority undermined by consequent investigation.[[9]](#footnote-9) This brings us to Pyrrhonian scepticism, which is founded on a certain flawed methodology in carrying out our consequent investigation.

### Pyrrhonian Scepticism

This undermining of default authority by consequent investigation finding our faculties to be fallacious and deceitful forms the foundation of Hume’s consequent scepticism:

There is another species of scepticism, *consequent* to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered, either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. (EHU 12.5)

Hume begins by examining the Pyrrhonian form of consequent scepticism. At first glance, it is not immediately obvious how to characterise Hume’s interpretation of Pyrrhonian scepticism, but upon inspection it becomes clear that the many and varied instances of Pyrrhonian scepticism detailed in EHU 12 all share a common methodological theme.

Traditionally, Pyrrhonian scepticism consists in attaining a state of suspension of belief by means of sceptical arguments.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, Hume sees the various Pyrrhonian sceptical arguments offered in EHU 12 as sharing the same methodological mistakes by either overstepping or understepping the boundaries of our faculties. We overstep the boundaries of our faculties when we pursue enquiries that our faculties are not equipped to handle, and we understep the boundaries of our faculties when we find certain operations of our faculties problematic with respect to certain enquiries, proceeding to dismiss all similar operations without further investigation, thus resulting in a suspension of belief regarding the products of these operations. The two often go hand in hand; Pyrrhonian scepticism often errs by initially venturing unwisely into enquiries beyond the scope of the reliability of our faculties, proceeding to unfairly overgeneralise the discovered unreliability. All of Hume’s cited examples of Pyrrhonian scepticism commit at least one of these two mistakes:

1. The ‘trite topics’ (EHU 12.6), which advocate doubting *all* our senses merely on the basis of certain instances in which the senses alone are unreliable, needing to be corrected by reason (oars appearing bent in water, double vision upon pressing one’s eye, etc.);
2. Scepticism arising from the doctrine of double existence (indirect realism), which is the result of theorising about and attempting to justify a thesis regarding the ultimate nature of reality that is incapable of being justified by our faculties – purporting to be a matter of fact, it can only be justified by our probable reasoning, but probable reasoning can say nothing for it, since we never experience a constant conjunction between external reality and our perceptions (EHU 12.10). Moreover, venturing into such enquiries actively engenders contradictions in our abstruse systems, as evinced by the Berkeleian arguments demonstrating a tension between the modern philosophy and a substantive notion of an external world (EHU 12.15).[[11]](#footnote-11)
3. Doubting *all* our abstract reasonings merely on the basis of paradoxes regarding infinite divisibility (EHU 12.18);
4. The ‘popular’ argument from the relativity of judgments, which advocates doubting *all* our probable judgments simply because some of them have proven unreliable (EHU 12.21);
5. And most explicitly, the ‘philosophical’ argument advocating a distrust of custom, simply because *other* instincts have proven fallacious:

…nothing leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, *like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful*. (EHU 12.22, emphasis added)

Argument (ii) oversteps the boundaries of our faculties by venturing unwisely into enquiries our faculties are not equipped to handle, in this case the question of whether there is an external world distinct from our perceptions. Arguments (i), (iii), (iv), and (v) both overstep and understep the boundaries of our faculties in using our faculties in circumstances in which they are unreliable (e.g. vision uncorrected by reason in the case of optical illusions, some instincts), proceeding to conclude that just because *some* operations of our faculties have been found wanting in some circumstances, we should distrust *all* of them.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this respect, Pyrrhonian scepticism is somewhat akin to attempting to use a saw to hammer nails, throwing it out in frustration when it fails in this doomed endeavour. Pyrrhonian scepticism is thus methodologically flawed in two ways. First, we should not attempt to employ our faculties beyond the scope of their reliability; that is, we should not overstep the boundaries of our faculties. Secondly, upon doing so and running into contradictions, we should not subsequently doubt wholesale the reliability of our faculties and suspend belief with respect to the products of these faculties; that is, we should not understep the boundaries of our faculties. This leads us to mitigated scepticism, which seeks to address these problems and offer the correct epistemic methodology.

## Mitigated Scepticism

What epistemic framework will address these two methodological problems inherent in Pyrrhonian scepticism? To remedy the first problem of overstepping the boundaries of our faculties, we should quite obviously refrain from employing our faculties beyond the scope of their reliability. First, this entails refraining wholesale from those faculties or operations that have been found completely unreliable, i.e. reliable under no circumstance. Examples of such operations are the ‘fallacious and deceitful’ instincts (EHU 12.22), which form the basis for the ‘philosophical’ argument against probable reasoning (EHU 12.22). Secondly, we should refrain from using normally reliable faculties or operations in particular conditions, or to enquiries, for which they are not reliable. Instances of this are vision when confronted with optical illusions and uncorrected by reason, i.e. the ‘trite topic’ of the ‘sceptics in all ages’ (EHU 12.6); and abstract reasoning as applied to topics such as infinite divisibility (EHU 12.18); see also reasoning when unduly affected by the ‘passion of *surprize* and *wonder*’ in the case of miracles (EHU 10.16). From these two steps it follows that we should entirely abstain from enquiries that have *no* faculties or operations that are equipped to handle them, such as ‘the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity’ (EHU 12.25).

The second problem of understepping the boundaries of our faculties through unfair generalisation is one of erroneous general rules, i.e. ‘prejudice’:

A fourth unphilosophical species of probability is that deriv’d from *general rules*, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call Prejudice. (THN 1.3.7.7)

Prejudice consists of taking ‘superfluous circumstances’ and generalising them (THN 1.3.7.8), leading to unphilosophical probable inferences.[[13]](#footnote-13) This accurately describes the relevant instances of Pyrrhonian scepticism: for example, the ‘trite topics’ conclude that the property responsible for errors in perception is ‘issuing from the senses’ rather than ‘being uncorrected by reason’; the paradoxes regarding infinite divisibility are treated as problematic in virtue of being abstract reasonings, rather than in virtue of concerning overly abstruse topics; and the ‘philosophical’ argument against probable reasoning takes the deliverances of our instincts to be erroneous in virtue of issuing from any instinct whatsoever, rather than in virtue of issuing from certain irregular instincts.

Of course, to use the last case as an example, discovering that instincts have been found fallible provides some *prima facie* inductive reason to think that custom, being an instinct, might also be fallible. But Pyrrhonian scepticism goes wrong in assuming that this gives us *decisive* reason to think that custom is fallible; the appropriate response is instead to carry out a more careful investigation, examining if the reason for certain instincts being fallible is their being *instincts*, or instead because of some other feature they possess. Additionally, we should also evaluate custom’s truth-conduciveness on its own terms by judging the reliability of its deliverances, giving it the opportunity to prove itself against these accusations. In short, when we find some operations of our faculties to be unreliable, we should investigate whether the reason for this unreliability is a general one, or whether it is peculiar to the unreliable operation in question, and/or the particular conditions under which we employed it, and/or the enquiries for which we employed it; by accurately determining the extent of unreliability, we form a better picture of the epistemic layout of our faculties. As Hume puts it, we should carefully determine the superfluous from the relevant circumstances in order to avoid overgeneralisation, that is, prejudice. Pyrrhonian scepticism is therefore ‘excessive’ because it goes too far in doubting wholesale our faculties on the basis of a few sceptical data-points – it exceeds the limits of what we *should* infer.[[14]](#footnote-14) So what if other instincts have been found fallacious, so long as custom has been determined to be truth-conducive (as Hume argues in EHU 5.21-22)? So what if our abstract reasoning concerning infinite divisibility is paradoxical? Other abstract enquiries are nevertheless reliable, for example mathematical reasoning (as Hume points out in EHU 12.27).[[15]](#footnote-15) So what if our senses can deceive us when uncorrected by reason? This gives us no reason to doubt our senses when they *are* carefully corrected by reason (as Hume notes in EHU 12.6). So what if our faculties are unable to say anything for the continued and distinct existence of our perceptions, and indeed run into contradictions when contemplating it? Our senses are nevertheless reliable in conveying information about the things we see, touch, feel, hear and taste (regardless of the underlying metaphysics), and our reasoning can nevertheless justify other theories within the scope of our enquiries, such as Hume’s own science of man.[[16]](#footnote-16)

So Pyrrhonian scepticism is theoretically suspect, as one might have expected it to be. The obvious solution is to remain exactly within the scope of the limitations of our faculties, neither overstepping it by venturing foolhardily into philosophical no-mans-land, nor understepping it by wantonly doubting by analogy. This is the methodology that mitigated scepticism embodies:

Another species of *mitigated* scepticism, which may be of advantage to mankind, and which may be the natural result of the Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples, is the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding… The *imagination* of man is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running, without controul, into the most distant parts of space and time in order to avoid the objects, which custom has rendered too familiar to it. A correct *Judgment* observes a contrary method, and avoiding all distant and high enquiries, confines itself to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience. (EHU 12.25)

Mitigated scepticism limits ‘our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding’, thus circumventing Pyrrhonism’s first problem of overstepping the limitations of our faculties. By limiting the scope of our enquiries thusly, we avoid enquiries that our faculties and operations cannot handle, and make sure to use only those faculties and operations that have been found reliable under suitable conditions to investigate ‘such subjects’ to which they are ‘best adapted’ (EHU 12.25), that is, those enquiries for which their reliability has been found to hold. Yet it allows us to trust those (and only those) faculties that have proven reliable under suitable conditions, rejecting the unfair generalisation (and thus, the universal doubt) of Pyrrhonian scepticism; thus, mitigated scepticism also sidesteps the second problem of understepping the limitations of our faculties faced by Pyrrhonism. In short, we are to identify the ‘narrow capacity of human understanding’ – that is, exactly those operations of the faculties that are reliable, the conditions under which this reliability holds, and the enquiries for which these operations are reliable – restricting our enquiries to those within the reach of this narrow capacity. It is in this sense that mitigated scepticism is a ‘natural result’ of Pyrrhonian scepticism (EHU 12.25) – it remedies the flawed methodology of Pyrrhonian scepticism by avoiding both initially overstepping and subsequently understepping the boundaries of knowledge. Having engaged with Pyrrhonian scepticism and realising its flaws in going beyond the limitations of our faculties, subsequently doubting them wholesale, one turns to mitigated scepticism, which avoids these sceptical quandaries by respecting the boundaries of human knowledge.

Such a limiting of the scope of our enquiries is facilitated by mitigated scepticism’s other exhortation to be diffident in our enquiries:

And if any of the learned be inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride, by shewing them, that the few advantages, which they may have attained over their fellows, are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature. In general, there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner. (EHU 12.24)

The temptation to venture beyond the scope of our faculties arises from overconfidence in the capabilities of these faculties. This problem is especially acute among the learned: fancying the power of their reason, they venture haughtily and obstinately into philosophical no-man’s-land. Just as ‘[a] wise man... proportions his belief to the evidence’ (EHU 10.4), we should proportion our trust in our faculties to our evidence of the reliability of these faculties; such diffidence will help us to humbly remain within the narrow capacity of human understanding, avoiding enquiries beyond this scope. Thus, one form of mitigated scepticism (epistemic diffidence) facilitates the other (limiting our enquiries). Moreover, given our tendency to overconfidence in general, we should also be diffident even when engaging in enquiries within the reach of our faculties, realising the fallibility of even the most reliable operations of the mind. Thus, to counteract any arrogant and impertinent dispositions to venture beyond the scope of our faculties that might arise in us, Hume recommends adopting a ‘general… degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty… in all kinds of scrutiny and decision’.

Thus, besides the above methodological considerations that lead Hume from Pyrrhonism to mitigated scepticism, Pyrrhonian scepticism also plays a vital non-theoretical role in facilitating this paradigm shift. Hume states that ‘a small tincture of Pyrrhonism’ might instil epistemic diffidence (EHU 12.24); moreover, he claims that ‘nothing can be more serviceable, than to be once thoroughly convinced of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt, and of the impossibility, that any thing, but the strong power of natural instinct, could free us from it’ (EHU 12.25).[[17]](#footnote-17) The sceptical turmoil that results from our entering the Pyrrhonian framework ensures that we maintain doxastic modesty and lower our overall confidence in our cognitive faculties; consequently, having been chastened thusly, we ‘will never be tempted to go beyond common life, so long as they consider the imperfection of those faculties which they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations’ (EHU 12.25), exactly as mitigated scepticism recommends. Despite its theoretical flaws and practical issues, Pyrrhonian scepticism can nevertheless be a useful stepping stone to achieving mitigated scepticism by chastening us, leading to both lower our overall confidence in our abilities, and also to subsequently limit the scope of our faculties.

A *prima facie* objection to my analysis may be raised at this point. My interpretation gives the ‘limitation of enquiries’ aspect of mitigated scepticism a primary role over the ‘epistemic diffidence’ aspect; however, in EHU 12, Hume first describes mitigated scepticism as recommending epistemic diffidence before describing its recommending the limitation of our enquiries, which might be thought to signify the primacy of the former over the latter. This observation of textual order is no real objection to my interpretation: although the limitation of our enquiries is the primary and most important aspect of mitigated scepticism, Hume first recommends epistemic diffidence because chronologically speaking, one typically has to first adopt epistemic diffidence in order subsequently to be able to limit our enquiries. Hume is raising a psychological point: by first adopting a dash of humility, the temptation to overstep the scope of our faculties will be sufficiently weakened that we may overcome it. Parallels may be drawn with Descartes’ *Meditations*: Descartes begins by recommending that we wholly dismiss all our prior beliefs before engaging with his philosophical project, partly because this will make us more receptive to his message by disabusing us of prior prejudices. Similarly, albeit on a less drastic (or more ‘mitigated’) scale, Hume recommends that we first lower our overall credence, so that we may find it easier to heed his exhortation to limit the scope of our enquiries.

Indeed, the primacy of the ‘limitation of scope’ aspect of mitigated scepticism is confirmed by the fact that Hume both begins and ends the *Enquiry* by emphasising it.[[18]](#footnote-18) His infamous exhortation to commit to the flames divinity or school metaphysics (EHU 12.34) at the very end of the *Enquiry* is obviously an instance of the limitation of our enquiries. But what has perhaps been less noted is that the limitation of our enquiries also features prominently in Hume’s introduction to the *Enquiry*’s project in EHU 1; moreover, the grounds he gives for this limitation are exactly as I described above, i.e. a careful examination of the precise reach of our faculties. In EHU 1 Hume dismisses ‘a considerable part of metaphysics’ because ‘they are not properly a science; but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, *which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding*, or from the craft of popular superstitions’ (EHU 1.11, emphasis added); such enquiries overreach, attempting to step beyond the narrow scope of human understanding. Hume argues that the only way to cast off the shadow of false metaphysics is by means of a careful empirical examination of the precise reach and scope of our faculties:

The *only method* of freeing learning, at once, from these abstruse questions [of a considerable part of metaphysics], is to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and *shew, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects*. (EHU 1.12, emphasis added)

And indeed, such an endeavour goes on to form the foundation for Hume’s positive project of his science of man:

Besides this advantage of rejecting, after deliberate enquiry, the most uncertain and disagreeable part of learning, there are many positive advantages, which result from an accurate scrutiny into the powers and faculties of human nature… It becomes, therefore, no inconsiderable part of science barely to know the different operations of the mind, to separate them from each other, to class them under their proper heads, and to correct all that seeming disorder, in which they lie involved, when made the object of reflection and enquiry. (EHU 1.13)

Hume’s point is that careful attention to the limits of our faculties not only allows us to dismiss false metaphysics, but also provides a basis for the science of man: the proper study of our faculties underlies the taxonomic project of human nature that Hume affectionately labels ‘mental geography’ (EHU 1.13), and this ‘mental geography’ in turn forms the basis for the discovery of the ‘secret springs and principles’ of the human mind:

…philosophy, if cultivated with care, and encouraged by the attention of the public, may carry its researches still farther, and discover, at least in some degree, the secret springs and principles, by which the human mind is actuated in its operations… (EHU 1.15)

Thus, it is this empirical investigation into the nature and limits of our faculties that is the grounds of Hume’s mitigated scepticism, both in its negative aspects (dismissing false metaphysics) and positive (grounding the science of man, therefore allowing for science and philosophy in the face of scepticism). Indeed, there is a mutual approval between Hume’s naturalistic science of man and mitigated scepticism: mitigated scepticism arises from the science of man, and in turn ultimately comes to recommend it over superstition and excessive scepticism. Far from Hume’s scepticism corroding his naturalism, the two rather corroborate one another.

Let me quickly sum up Hume’s epistemology in EHU 12. As evinced by his rejection of antecedent scepticism, he begins by investing our faculties with default authority. Hume then turns these faculties to reflexively distinguish reliable from unreliable operations of the mind in consequent investigation. However, Hume recommends that we be careful not to either overstep or understep the reach of our faculties in this consequent investigation, as evinced by his dismissal of Pyrrhonian scepticism. In line with his favoured mitigated scepticism, we should determine the narrow capacity of human understanding, investing it with ‘consequent’ justification, and limit our enquiries to those within the reach of this narrow capacity, as per mitigated scepticism. Having found those faculties that are indeed reliable according to our consequent investigation, we are thereby entitled to trust the beliefs that issue from these faculties.[[19]](#footnote-19)

To see how the above account would take more concrete form, let us examine the implications that this reading of Hume’s mitigated scepticism has for probable reasoning. Hume notes that ‘it is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another’ (EHU 12.29). By experience Hume means inductive reasoning, which he shows in Section 5 to be founded on custom. Having accorded the faculties default authority, Hume then is licensed to employ the faculties in investigating the reliability of the faculties and operations of the mind. Despite worrying (from the perspective of the Pyrrhonian sceptic) that custom, ‘like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful’ (EHU 12.22), custom is in fact discovered to be a truth-conducive operation, and is therefore consequently justified. Hume endorses custom in the conclusion of EHU 5 as being ‘infallible in its operations’ in ensuring a ‘correspondence’ between ‘the course of nature’ and ‘the succession of our ideas’; the fact that ‘our thoughts and conceptions have… gone on in the same train with the other works of nature’ makes for a kind of ‘pre-established harmony’ (EHU 5.21-22). Having consequently justified custom, Hume is licensed to rely on experience in his probable reasoning; mitigated scepticism allows for Hume to maintain his enquiries into matters of fact so long as he relies on the consequently justified operation of custom.[[20]](#footnote-20)

On the other hand, mitigated scepticism clearly excludes false metaphysics; such enquiries do not fall under the scope of proper enquiry into either matters of fact or relations of ideas (EHU 12.34), and so do not fall within the narrow capacity of human understanding, since there are no consequently justified faculties suited to tackle such enquiries – hence Hume’s melodramatic exhortation to commit such speculations to the flames. Mitigated scepticism also excludes excessive scepticism, since it licenses us to trust those operations of our faculties that have been found reliable under suitable conditions and applied to appropriate enquiries. Yet it allows for science and philosophy, which lie within the narrow reach of our faculties, being products of probable reasoning founded on custom. In short, mitigated scepticism achieves all of Hume’s epistemic goals. This, I venture, is not a coincidence – mitigated scepticism gives the right results, because it is the theoretically correct epistemic methodology, as seen from the ways in which it remedies the methodological failures of antecedent and Pyrrhonian scepticism.

## The Extent of Hume’s Scepticism in EHU 12

Having offered my interpretation of EHU 12 above, I will in this section briefly engage with the more standard reading of EHU 12 as embodying a deep theoretical scepticism (e.g. Popkin 1951, Penelhum 1983, Fogelin 1983, Fogelin 1993, and Winkler 1999).[[21]](#footnote-21) I will address some passages that seem to suggest this sceptical reading, pointing out how my non-sceptical interpretation can accommodate these passages. I then note a few advantages that my account has over the standard sceptical reading. Note that this is certainly not to refute the sceptical reading of EHU 12, but merely to anticipate some putative textual objections and adduce a few *prima facie* considerations in favour of my account over the standard sceptical reading.

One objection to my account might stem from interpretations such as Fogelin (1993, p. 92), which take our fundamental beliefs to have only an arbitrary basis, because they are formed by arbitrary mechanisms. Given this arbitrariness of our belief-forming mechanisms, it seems that we lack any substantive epistemic reason to believe in their products. One passage that Fogelin (1993, p. 92) cites in support of this is EHU 12.5:

There is another species of scepticism, *consequent* to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered, either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. Even our very senses are brought into dispute, by a certain species of philosophers; and the maxims of common life are subjected to the same doubt as the most profound principles or conclusions of metaphysics and theology. (EHU 12.5)

Fogelin takes this passage as claiming that the basis of consequent scepticism is the arbitrariness of our belief-forming mechanisms. However, the passage does not seem to indicate a concern with *arbitrariness*, but rather suggests that the basis for consequent scepticism is instead founded on finding our ‘mental faculties’ to be ‘fallacious’ (EHU 12.5). This is exactly in line with my interpretation: both forms of consequent scepticism arise upon finding errors with our faculties upon consequent investigation. Of course, as I argue, the implications of these errors are ultimately not epistemically debilitating so long as we are careful with regard to the scope of the resulting doubt, as per mitigated scepticism (in contrast with Pyrrhonian scepticism).

With regard to custom more specifically, Fogelin cites EHU 5.22 as evidence that Hume takes custom to be arbitrary insofar as it leads us to inductive inferences ‘in the complete absence of rational insight’ (p. 100):

As nature has taught us the use of our limbs, without giving us the knowledge of the muscles and nerves, by which they are actuated; so has she implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects; though we are ignorant of those powers and forces, on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends. (EHU 5.22)

However, I believe Fogelin misses that EHU 5.22 (as well as the paragraph prior) is exactly where Hume emphasises the truth-conducive nature of custom, which is exactly why our reliance on custom is not arbitrary, but rather well-founded – Hume emphasises that custom is ‘infalliable in its operations’ in ensuring a ‘correspondence’ between our causal beliefs and nature (EHU 5.22). Although it is true that custom is not the product of ‘rational insight’, our reliance on it is nevertheless far from arbitrary: we have good justification for this reliance, having found custom to be truth-conducive. Thus, since I do not take our reliance on our faculties to be arbitrary, there is no cause for any deep theoretical scepticism on this point.

Another textual reason to read Hume as embracing a deep scepticism in EHU 12 might be thought to stem from his reference to the ‘universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature’ (EHU 12.24). If such perplexity and confusion is universal, then how can Hume maintain that some of our faculties are reliable and justified (and hence presumably neither perplexed nor confused?). In response, I want to note that Hume’s statement of ‘the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature’ does not indicate that *all* our faculties are completely confused, but rather that there is some degree of perplexity and confusion in *everyone*. In short, ‘universal’ is meant to range not over our faculties, but rather epistemic agents. Indeed, context shows that Hume cannot mean that all our faculties are completely confused. In the very next paragraph, Hume indicates that within the bounds of common life (in which philosophy is included), enquiry is legitimate. It is only when venturing ‘beyond common life’ that we have to consider ‘the imperfection of those faculties which they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations’ (EHU 12.25). This strongly suggests that in referencing the ‘universal perplexity and confusion’ in human nature, Hume only means that our faculties are confused and perplexed beyond the bounds of common life and philosophy, a fact that is true of everyone. For instance, in EHU 5.21-22, Hume emphasises that custom is a reliable and truth-conducive operation, as noted previously.

The strongest support for the sceptical reading of EHU 12 unquestionably derives from Hume’s seemingly concessesion that the Pyrrhonian arguments have no answer. Winkler (1999, p. 196) argues that although Hume dismisses Pyrrhonian scepticism, ‘he does not quarrel with the truth of the argument’s conclusion’, noting that Hume thinks that mankind is unable ‘to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them’ (EHU 12.23). Similarly, Hume claims that ‘These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them’ (EHU 12.21).[[22]](#footnote-22) Hume’s comments regarding Berkeley’s arguments for idealism seemingly support such a reading:

This is a topic, therefore, in which the profounder and more philosophical sceptics will always triumph, when they endeavour to introduce an universal doubt into all subjects of human knowledge and enquiry. (EHU 12.14)

But that all [Berkeley’s] arguments, though otherwise intended, are, in reality, merely sceptical, appears from this, that they admit of no answerand produce no conviction.’ (EHU 12.15n)

Hume also notes regarding the philosophical objection to probable reasoning that the sceptic ‘seems to have ample matter of triumph’, and ‘shews his force, or rather indeed, his own and our weakness; and he seems, for a time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction’ (EHU 12.22).

I think that this sceptical reading of Hume fails to appreciate the extent to which Pyrrhonian scepticism is a *methodology* rather than simply a ‘set of doctrines or truths’, as Stroud (1999) rightly points out (Stroud calls it a ‘way of life’, p. 241). Hume’s statements above are situated in his discussion of the methodology of Pyrrhonian scepticism (EHU 12.6-23). If we adopt this methodology of venturing beyond the scope of the reliability of our faculties, subsequently doubting them wholesale, then such doubts would indeed be unanswerable, as Hume notes in the above passages. Of course, Hume does not adopt this methodology, nor does he think such a methodology to be defensible or even adoptable. From the point of view of Hume’s own mitigated scepticism, such doubts do not even arise, much less require answering. For example, Berkeley’s arguments ‘admit of no answer’ so long as we accept his enquiries as *legitimate*; Hume’s point is that we should not grant them legitimacy in the first place, because they outrun the reach of our faculties. Mitigated scepticism does not accept such arguments as sufficient epistemic reasons to undermine our trust in our beliefs and faculties.

Of course, besides being theoretically suspect, Pyrrhonian scepticism it is also *practically* suspect, as Hume points out in EHU 12.23, wherein he emphasises the psychological untenability and unhealthy consequences of Pyrrhonian scepticism. Indeed, Hume seems to think that the practical problems are decisive reasons against Pyrrhonism, quite aside from theoretical considerations: he calls the unhealthy consequences of Pyrrhonism the ‘chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* scepticism’ (*ibid*.). However, this is not inconsistent with Hume also having a *theoretical* response to Pyrrhonian scepticism.[[23]](#footnote-23) And indeed, we might be more interested in the theoretical problems that Hume finds in Pyrrhonian scepticism, which lends insight to the *theoretical* basis for his mitigated scepticism (a theoretical basis that commentators often deny Hume, as seen above).

It may be objected that Hume’s practical response to scepticism does not supplement a theoretical answer so much as supplant one; obviously, this would be the line favoured by sceptical readings of EHU 12. For instance, Millican (2012, Sect.1) sees Hume to offer only a practical justification for our inductive inferences in EHU 12. This brings me to the first advantage that I think my interpretation enjoys over the standard sceptical one. I think interpretations that lean solely on a practical response to scepticism fail to provide sufficient grounding for Hume’s naturalism; which is to say, such readings fail to do justice to Kemp Smith’s worry. This would be to sacrifice Hume’s naturalism in favour of his scepticism, rather than genuinely reconciling the two. This is a point Durland raises with respect to the *Treatise*:

If Hume’s fully considered position is that radical doubts preclude our ever acquiring adequate reasons for believing anything, then his similarly reflective stance on the projects of the *Treatise* must be that they are bankrupt (Durland 2011, p. 85)

An interpretation that treated Hume as seeing no theoretical answer to excessive scepticism would fail to do justice to the constructive portion of his work. If we can find in Hume a theoretical answer (even one that is not completely explicit) that can justify his naturalistic ambitions and yet make sense of what he says on scepticism, then we have *prima facie* reason to accept it. I hope in this paper to offer such an account.

Relatedly, a more minor textual advantage is that I believe my interpretation better accommodates Hume’s claim that the Pyrrhonian sceptic only ‘*seems* to have ample matter of triumph’ even within ‘his proper sphere’ (EHU 12.22, emphasis added). It seems unlikely that the practical objections to Pyrrhonism can wholly account for the Pyrrhonian sceptic only *seeming* to triumph, much less when *within their proper sphere* (in ‘the schools’ – EHU 12.21), which presumably is intended to exclude common life (since it is incompatible with Pyrrhonism). Were the practical objections all that could be raised, with the Pyrrhonian remaining theoretically undefeated, there would be a clear, vital sense (i.e. a theoretical one) in which the Pyrrhonian would genuinely triumph; indeed, on such a view, it seems wholly inaccurate to describe the Pyrrhonian as only enjoying a seeming victory within their proper sphere. However, my interpretation can account for the Pyrrhonian only seeming to triumph even in the schools. For if, upon close inspection, Pyrrhonism embodies a methodological flaw, then it would seems accurate to say that the Pyrrhonian sceptic only *seems* to triumph even within their proper sphere.

A third advantage is that my interpretation offers an explanation for Hume’s exhortation to limit the scope of our enquiries; this is in contrast to those who are unimpressed by the theoretical basis for Hume’s mitigated scepticism (or, more accurately, the perceived lack thereof). For instance, Penelhum claims that Hume has no grounds for his recommendation to limit the scope of our enquiries, since both science and false metaphysics are equally devoid of epistemic justification:

How can [Hume] recommend that we confine ourselves to the reflections of common life, when their presuppositions are as incapable of rational justification as the pretensions of metaphysics? Penelhum (1983, p. 127)

The only answer Penelhum can give on Hume’s behalf is that all humans are impelled to the beliefs of common life whereas only some humans are impelled to false metaphysics, but Penelhum finds this answer unsatisfactory because some individuals might find it impossible to avoid overly metaphysical speculations. Winkler (1999, p. 208) similarly confesses that he has ‘so far been unable to discern’ what Hume’s reason is for advocating the limitation of the scope of our enquiries, ‘or even what it could be’.[[24]](#footnote-24) In short, sceptical interpretations of EHU 12, while able to explain the ‘epistemic diffidence’ aspect of mitigated scepticism, seem to struggle to explain the ‘limitation of scope’ aspect.

However, my interpretation handily explains this aspect of mitigated scepticism. According to my reading, Hume *does* have good reason to advocate a limitation of our enquiries: that is, a proper empirical investigation of the reliability of our faculties.[[25]](#footnote-25) The justification for trusting a subset of the operations of our faculties and not venturing beyond them is that such a subset has been found reliable by consequent investigation.[[26]](#footnote-26) We should throw out tools that have been found untrustworthy, such as hammers without heads, or beliefs arising from education, or probable reasoning founded on contiguity and resemblance. But also, the right tools must be used for the right jobs. Just as we would not use a saw to hammer nails, we should not use, say, abstract reasoning for enquiries to which it is not suited, such as infinite divisibility. Moreover, if an area of enquiry has no reliable operations that are equipped to handle it, such as enquiries concerning ‘the origin of worlds’, or ‘the situation of nature’ (EHU 12.25), then we should abstain from it. This is the heart of the mitigated scepticism that guides Hume’s philosophy: it is a diffident yet optimistic scepticism firmly grounded in empiricism, deriving from the results of his science of man. In short, according to my interpretation, Hume has excellent epistemic grounds for his exhortation to limit the scope of our enquiries. Similarly, his exhortation to epistemic diffidence can be justified by the empirical fact that we tend to overestimate our epistemic capabilities; a general rule recommending an across-the-board downward adjustment of our confidence levels will, on the whole, make us better epistemic agents.

In sum, my interpretation can accommodate the passages in EHU 12 that seem to suggest a deep theoretical scepticism, and moreover enjoys a few advantages over the more standard sceptical reading. Thus, I believe my interpretation is a plausible and tenable one, that moreover makes sense of Hume’s project in the *Enquiry*.

## Hume’s Epistemology in EHU 12 and Contemporary Internalism

Having explained Hume’s epistemology in EHU 12 on its own terms, it might also be fruitful to briefly examine it through the lenses of contemporary epistemology. I will argue that Hume’s epistemology as described above is a nuanced and subtle internalist one, comprising both elements of Wright-style conservatism, as well as a form of internalist reliabilism in the vein of Steup. Of course, I do not mean to claim that Hume’s account is identical in the details to these contemporary frameworks, but only that the general themes in these contemporary systems mirrors Hume’s own.

Recall that Hume’s epistemology in EHU 12 comprises two layers: first, Hume’s granting of antecedent justification (or default authority) to our faculties; second, Hume’s reflexively granting most of our faculties and operations consequent justification. The strategy of according a group of beliefs or perceptions or faculties default authority is a move made by a number of internalist foundationalist accounts, such as Wright’s (2002, 2004) ‘conservative’ position; in similar vein is Pryor’s (2000, 2004) ‘dogmatist’ position, which holds that perceptual beliefs are immediately and non-derivatively justified in themselves. I take it that Hume’s granting of antecedent justification to our faculties is broadly internalist in nature, insofar as this default authority does not seem to hinge on any external considerations. Thus, at the level of antecedent justification, I read Hume as committed to an internalist epistemology (at least in the *Enquiry*), rather than externalist interpretations of the sort defended by Loeb (2002) and Schmitt (2014) with regard to the *Treatise*.

This brings us to the question of which form of contemporary internalism most closely mirrors Hume’s according our faculties default authority.[[27]](#footnote-27) Here I will compare Hume with two contemporary foundationalist accounts: Wright’s ‘conservatism’ and Pryor’s ‘dogmatism’. Briefly, Pryor’s dogmatism takes perceptual experiences (more specifically, their phenomenology) as able to provide us with immediate (although defeasible) justification, without requiring justification from any other proposition. In contrast. Wright’s conservatism thinks that our epistemic foundations are ‘cornerstones’ – presuppositions that are fundamental to our epistemic projects. These cornerstones are justified without our antecedently having evidence for them (Wright 2004, p. 175) if these propositions are cornerstones of our intellectual projects (Wright 2004, p. 177); since to doubt these cornerstones would cripple our epistemic projects, we are entitled to rely on them.

I venture that the rationale Hume provides for granting default justification to our faculties seems to broadly mirror Wright’s ‘conservative’ brand of internalism, as Garrett (2015, pp. 243-4) points out. Examine Hume’s rationale for dismissing antecedent scepticism and granting our faculties defaults justification:

There is a species of scepticism, antecedent to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing: Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject. (EHU 12.4)

Hume’s reason for initially trusting our faculties prior to investigation (that is, for granting them default authority) is that we could never make any progress in our intellectual endeavours without using our faculties in the first place – even if there were an ‘original principle’ which was indubitable, we could not make any epistemic advancement without presupposing the veracity of our faculties. This suggests a view similar to Wright’s – that is, we are entitled to initially trust our faculties, because without such trust, we could not hope to make any headway with respect to any epistemic project whatsoever. In other words, the default assumption of the trustworthiness of our faculties is a crucial cornerstone to any intellectual project we could hope to have, and therefore is something that we are entitled to assume. Thus, we can accord our faculties with antecedent justification. In this regard, this stage of Hume’s epistemology has strong parallels to Wright-style conservatism.[[28]](#footnote-28)

However, as mentioned in the paper, antecedent justification is only part of the story; to fully justify our faculties, we might accord them with consequent justification. I suggest that having used Wright-style conservatism as a springboard for the first stage (pertaining to antecedent justification), Hume then progresses into internalist reliabilism for the second stage (pertaining to consequent justification). Here I think Hume’s project parallels Steup’s (2004) account, although Steup restricts his account to the senses and memory: ‘A subject’s sense experiences are a source of justification for her iff she has a memory impression of a track record of both perceptual and memorial success’ (p. 408). The idea is that we can justify our reliance on sense experiences by past experience of their reliability. The account is obviously a reliabilist one, but whereas reliabilism is typically taken to be externalist in nature, Steup’s is wholly internalist. To illustrate the difference between the two, examine the following. If our senses are in fact reliable, but our experience told us that it was not, then would we be justified in trusting our senses? The externalist reliabilist says yes, while the internalist reliabilist says no. Conversely, if our senses are in fact unreliable, but our experience told us that it was, then the externalist reliabilist would deny that we are justified in trusting our senses, while the internalist reliabilist would affirm our justification in this respect.

Hume’s account is more general than Steup’s in applying to all our faculties (rather than just the senses and memory), but is otherwise broadly similar. As argued in this paper, Hume’s consequent justification of our faculties takes the following form: we use our faculties to reflexively investigate themselves; having found certain faculties and operations to be reliable through this consequent investigation, we can accord these faculties and operations consequent justification. This is clearly a reliabilist account, as consequent justification is a function of evidence of reliability. But this is also an internalist account; what is epistemologically crucial is not whether the faculties and operations are in fact reliable, but rather whether we have evidence for thinking them to be so on the basis of our consequent investigation of their reliability.[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, Hume’s consequent justification of our faculties clearly appeals to a form of internalist reliabilism.

Of course, unlike Wright, Steup believes that we can only rely on our faculties on evidential grounds – that is, finding them to be reliable. Thus, Hume only parallels Steup with regard to consequent justification: we can accord our faculties with consequent justification only on the basis of finding them to be reliable. With regard to antecedent justification, Hume parallels Wright – we can accord our faculties with antecedent justification on the basis of non-evidential grounds, in virtue of the fact that trust in our faculties is a cognitive cornerstone of any epistemic project we could hope to have.

This distinction between antecedent and consequent justification might offer an answer to a seeming circularity. On the face of it, it seems as though on my interpretation, Hume’s account proceeds in a circular manner – it justifies our faculties by using the very same faculties themselves, which already assumes that the faculties are indeed justified. Nevertheless, we might go some way in avoiding circularity by distinguishing between two forms of justification, as I have done. Antecedent justification or default authority is non-evidential in nature – it is unearned, and arises from the fact that certain assumptions have to be made for there to be any hope of our cognitive projects succeeding at all. On the other hand, consequent justification is evidential in nature, and very much earned. A faculty is only consequently justified if we have done the hard work of collecting evidence for its reliability. Given this distinction between the two forms of justification, the circle is broken – we use antecedently justified faculties to consequently justify these same faculties, which does not seem obviously circular. And if there is any circularity here, it certainly does not seem obviously vicious in nature.

Schmitt (2014) also defends a reliabilist account of Hume, but his account crucially differs from mine in two major respects.[[30]](#footnote-30) The first is that Schmitt’s account is given as an interpretation of the *Treatise* (p. 399), whereas mine applies to the *Enquiry*. Perhaps Hume’s epistemology in the *Treatise* is reliabilist, and perhaps it is not; either way, my paper does not feign a hypothesis. The second major difference between our accounts is that Schmitt’s is an externalist one (p. 22), whereas mine is internalist in nature.

I believe that internalism makes Hume’s account both more and less novel. It is more novel to us, since we often take reliabilism to be an externalist thesis; it would be pleasing and surprising to see such a unique and subtle position in Hume. But importantly, it is less novel to his contemporaries, who were decidedly internalist – externalist epistemologies are conspicuous by their absence in the early modern period. Thus I hope to skirt some of the objections of anachronism that typically plague externalist interpretations such as Loeb (2002) and Schmitt (2014), since it seems that externalism was not even on the radar in Hume’s period. In this, I hope to have my cake and eat it to, attributing to Hume a novel account that yet avoids anachronism. The interpretation of EHU 12 offered in this paper makes sense of Hume’s discussions in EHU 12 of the various forms of scepticism, as well Hume’s narrative in proceeding from antecedent to Pyrrhonian to mitigated scepticism. This interpretation also coheres with Hume’s experimental method as well as his stated ambitions in EHU 1. Moreover, on this reading Hume’s epistemology seems of philosophical interest as well as being tenable, and has interesting parallels to contemporary epistemological accounts. I hope to have shown that Hume’s epistemology in EHU 12 is a novel and subtle one that is deserving of more attention that it has hitherto received.[[31]](#footnote-31)

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1. In the references to Hume’s texts throughout, ‘THN’ refers to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, ‘EHU’ to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and HL to *The Letters of David Hume*. Arabic numerals refer to section and paragraph numbers (EHU); and book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (THN). HL Roman numerals refer to volume, and Arabic numerals to page numbers in the Greig edition of the *Letters* (OUP, 1932). Note also that in referring to the ‘*Enquiry*’ in this paper, I mean the first *Enquiry*, that is, the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*; in referring to the ‘*Treatise*’, I typically mean Book 1 of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One might attempt to circumvent this worry by simply arguing that Hume takes various views from various standpoints, and there is no need to think that these different views are reconcilable. ‘Perspectivalist’ interpretations of this form are defended by Strawson (1985), Popkin (1986) Fogelin (1998), de Pierris (2001), Russell (2008), and Hakkarainen (2012). I lack the space to address such interpretations here, but see also Durland (2011, pp. 86-9) for some criticism of perspectivalist accounts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I lack the space to enter into this here, but one of my motivations for focusing exclusively on the *Enquiry* in this paper is that I think Hume’s treatment of scepticism to significantly differ between the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. Adequately defending this claim would require much more than I can afford in this paper, and so I content myself with examining EHU 12 in relative isolation from the *Treatise* in this essay. Elsewhere, in my Qu (2014b), I defend (and ultimately critique) an interpretation of THN 1.4.7 that differs markedly from the account of EHU 12 that I put forward here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Hume’s infamous ‘Advertisement’ to the volume of *Essays and Treatises* that contains his two *Enquiries*, the *Dissertation on the Passions*, and *The Natural History of Religion*, which claims that these works should ‘alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles’; Hume states that this Advertisement ‘is a compleat Answer to Dr Reid and to that bigoted silly Fellow, Beattie’ (HL ii. 301). Insofar as Reid and Beattie read Hume as an unmitigated sceptic (and indeed the crude sceptical reading of Hume has become known as the ‘Reid-Beattie interpretation’), it is not a stretch to think that Hume wrote the Advertisement with his discussion of scepticism in the *Enquiry* in mind, among other things. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hume also endorses a ‘moderate’, watered-down version of antecedent scepticism that merely recommends for us ‘[t]o begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions, and examine accurately all their consequences’ (EHU 12.3); in referring to ‘antecedent scepticism’ in this paper, I mean the extreme variety that Hume dismisses. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Probable reasoning can say nothing for or against indirect realism, but abstract reasoning can tell against it, pointing out inconsistencies between the modern system and a non-empty notion of an external world. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hence there is an element of truth to ‘reflexivity’ interpretations such as Baier (1991) and Korsgaard (1996), although they give it a much more prominent role than I do: as Baier puts it, ‘*Successful reflexivity is normativity*’ (pp. 99-100). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I do not think a great deal rests on the exact account of truth Hume adopts, which is itself an important topic. Hume suggests a correspondence account in EHU 5.21 in his (admittedly somewhat ironical) discussion of ‘pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas’, but this might prove problematic if we take seriously his scepticism regarding the external world. If the correspondence theory holds, then a truth-conducive faculty would simply be one that tended to produce true representations; on a coherence theory, a truth-conducive faculty might be one that tended to produce regular, mutually confirming beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One might ask why Hume’s rejection of antecedent scepticism grants default authority to *all* our faculties, given that enquiry is possible once we rely on some (but not all) our faculties. In light of this, shouldn’t default authority be granted only to some (but not all) our faculties? I believe that default authority is granted to all our faculties because, prior to investigation (which is the stage at which this level of justification occurs), it would be completely arbitrary to accord default authority to some faculties but not others – there are no *a priori* reasons to prefer one faculty over another. It is only once we have conducted a consequent enquiry that we can draw justificatory distinctions between our faculties, as Pyrrhonian and mitigated scepticism do in their own ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hume’s rather crude interpretation of Pyrrhonian scepticism is commonly considered at least somewhat unfaithful to the historical school of Pyrrhonian sceptics (for instance, see Livingston 1998, p. 160; Norton 1982, p. 266-7; and Penelhum 1983, p. 127). I thus elect to refrain from a more detailed historical study of Pyrrhonism, as it would be of limited use in discerning the subtleties of Hume’s characterisation of Pyrrhonian scepticism in EHU 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hume treats these as two separate arguments, but I group them together here since they address the same sceptical issue (the external world) and share the same methodological mistake (overstepping the boundaries of our faculties). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Although all Pyrrhonian arguments are guilty of the same fault, some are nevertheless ‘trite’ (EHU 12.6, argument [i] above) or ‘weak’ (EHU 12.21, argument [iv] above) because of their superficial nature. Compare the weak, ‘popular’ argument against probable reasoning with the philosophical one. The ‘popular’ argument very superficially rules out probable reasoning simply because some instances have proven unreliable, which even *prima facie* seems like bad inductive reasoning (after all, what about the many instances in which probable reasoning has been successful?). In contrast, the ‘philosophical’ argument ‘arises from more profound researches’ (EHU 12.22) in going deeper and investigating the nature of our belief-forming disposition that is custom, and so has more philosophical force. A similar contrast can be observed between the ‘trite topics’ against the senses and the scepticism arising from the doctrine of double existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Although I aim to examine EHU 12 on its own terms, I do occasionally refer to some portions of the *Treatise*, most notably Hume’s discussion of prejudice in THN 1.3.7. I think this is unproblematic, as I think Hume’s views on what constitutes correct and incorrect probable reasoning (unlike, I think, his views on the *justification* of correct probable reasoning) do not seem to change significantly between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* (which probably omits these discussion for reasons of space more than anything, since the *Enquiry* seems a much leaner and more streamlined work than the *Treatise*; notably, the *Enquiry* seems to carry less explicit emphasis on associationistic psychology, and seems to have a more normative bent). In any case, it seems clear and intuitive that overgeneralising (or ‘prejudice’) seems like poor probable reasoning, whatever one’s epistemology; although Hume does not discuss prejudice in the *Enquiry*, the point seems obvious enough that he is entitled to assume it in EHU 12. Thus on the whole, the *Treatise* does not play a substantive role in my interpretation EHU 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alternatively, one might think that Pyrrhonian scepticism is ‘excessive’ because it goes beyond the limits of what we are able to psychologically sustain. This interpretation also seems a plausible one in context. Although the reading of why Pyrrhonian scepticism is ‘excessive’ that I offered above is more consonant with my interpretation, this psychological reading is nevertheless perfectly consistent with my interpretation, since I agree that Pyrrhonian scepticism is psychologically untenable, as I mention later in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Note that the abstract reasoning concerning infinite divisibility does involve mathematical reasoning (e.g. ‘conclusions concerning the properties of circles and triangles’ [EHU 12.18]), but this is not the suspect part of the enquiry; rather, the problematic portion seems to rest on metaphysical (in the contemporary sense of the term) doctrines about the fundamental nature of reality. This issue has some correspondence with the contemporary metaphysical debate on whether matter is composed of indivisible simples, or is ‘gunky’ (that is, infinitely divisible); this is quite clearly a metaphysical rather than a mathematical dispute, and it is the metaphysics that Hume takes issue with. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. While we seem able to verify the reliability of the senses with regard to first-order questions such as ‘the table is brown’, we do not seem able to garner any evidence for the reliability of second-order metaphysical theses regarding the external world (e.g. whether or not the brown table has continued and distinct existence). I think Hume treats such enquiries as lying beyond the limitations of our faculties, and thus abstains from such questions, as per his mitigated scepticism (which I will explain shortly). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Note that this does not mean that Pyrrhonism has no theoretical reply. Even if Pyrrhonism has a theoretical flaw, it might seem so convincing and compelling that, as a practical matter of fact, only natural instinct can free us from this framework once we are immersed in it. Hume is only claiming that we should *once* be convinced by Pyrrhonian doubt, and *once* be convinced of the impossibility of anything but natural instinct freeing us from it. What is serviceable is for us to once accept the Pyrrhonian methodology; within that methodology, we erroneously (but luckily, only temporarily) believe that Pyrrhonism has no theoretical answer (as I discussed previously), and thus erroneously (but temporarily) believe that only natural instinct can overcome it. And indeed, natural instinct might indeed be the most psychologically effective way of shaking off the Pyrrhonian framework, being the causal force that snaps us out of our reverie. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Of course, the limitation of our enquiries also features in the heart of the *Enquiry*, notably in his discussion of necessary connection in Section 7; since our faculties are not equipped to infer (or even entertain) any notion of ‘necessary connection’ above and beyond the impression of reflection that accompanies causal association, that is all we can mean by the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ainslie (2015) takes a similar view with regard to the *Treatise*, arguing that Hume dismisses false philosophy on the basis of its trespassing the limitations of our faculties (see p.152, for instance). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. With regard to the external world, the situation is a bit more complex. As Hume notes, when employed to enquiries concerning the external world, our natural instinct and our reason lie in tension with one another (EHU 12.15). This does not mean that we should reject both faculties, but only that we should be careful to circumscribe our use of instinct and reason, and not apply them to topics beyond the reach of our faculties, such as the fraught issue of the external world. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Although strictly speaking, this passage only indicates that the task of defeating Pyrrhonian scepticism in the schools *might* be impossible, and is at least difficult. Therefore, the passage leaves open the possibility that Pyrrhonian scepticism can be defeated in the schools, and is thus consistent with my position. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Avnur (2016) for another example of a commentator that does not take the pragmatic justification expressed in this passage to exhaust Hume’s response to scepticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Quite apart from my textual qualms with Winkler on this matter, I find such accounts interpretively unsatisfying in rendering Hume’s narrative in EHU 12 disjointed and non-cohesive, reading what seems to be one of his main conclusions of this section as a *non-sequitur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Of course, this is not a refutation of the sceptical readings adopted by Penelhum, Winkler, and others. Rather, I merely point out that my interpretation offers a way of making sense of Hume’s exhortation to limit the scope of our enquiries, which is something that Winkler for instance feels his interpretation struggles to account for. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In correspondence, Peter Millican raises the worry that this is circular with respect to probable reasoning, as we can only justify probable reasoning by appealing to probable reasoning itself. I do not think that this is unique to probable reasoning: we can only establish the reliability of our memories by presupposing the reliability of our memories, for instance; the same might be said of our senses. In any case, I do not take this to be problematic, as the worry of circularity is addressed by Hume’s investing our faculties with default authority, therefore licensing us to make use of these faculties to consequently justify themselves, as I explain in more detail in the conclusion of this paper. The alternative is antecedent scepticism. This suggests an account of how inductive beliefs are justified for Hume – although we can give no reason for the Uniformity Principle, the principle is nevertheless justified, because it issues from custom, which has first default justification, and then consequent justification once it reflectively assesses itself. I address the issue of circularity in the next section, and also discuss it in my Qu (2014a). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point, and for some very helpful comments on the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In my Qu (2014a, p. 28, fn. 48), I suggest that perhaps the Title Principle in THN 1.4.7 might have analogies with Pryor’s dogmatism, since according to the Title Principle, what justifies our beliefs seems to be a phenomenological fact (i.e. reason being lively). In a draft, Dan Waxman and I suggest that THN 1.4.7 might parallel Pryor’s dogmatism, while EHU 12 might parallel Wright’s conservatism. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. One consequence of this internalism is that our consequent justification for relying on our truth-conducive faculties will vary from individual to individual. Certainly, almost everyone (except perhaps infants and animals) performs some crude higher-order reasoning about the reliability of our faculties. We wonder whether our memory is reliable, we sigh at our ability to muck up even the simplest arithmetic, and we ponder the astuteness of our generalisations. Given that almost everyone undertakes a minimal level of such reflection, almost everyone possesses at least a minimal level of consequent justification. Of course, more reflective agents who investigate the reliability of their faculties with more acuity will enjoy more consequent justification, which seems an intuitive result. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Beebee (2006, p. 73) also offers a reliabilist justification for our causal beliefs on Hume’s behalf, but does not take this to constitute Hume’s answer to inductive scepticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. An overwhelming debt of gratitude is owed towards Don Garrett, who patiently commented on multiple drafts of this paper. Much thanks is also due to Béatrice Longuenesse and Jim Pryor, for commenting on an earlier version of this paper, which was then part of my dissertation. I also owe a great deal to Jonathan Cottrell, Peter Millican, and Amyas Merivale for very helpful comments and discussion. I am also very grateful to two anonymous referees for this journal, whose incisive and detailed comments improved this paper greatly. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)